HOME
December 14, 2008

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 126
Mark 1:1–8
Isaiah 40:1–11

"Those who go out weeping . . .
shall come home with shouts of joy"
Psalm 126:6 (NRSV)

I cannot claim that I have found the home I long for every day of my life,
not by a long shot, but I believe that in my heart I have found,
and have maybe always known, the way that leads to it.
I believe that the home we long for and belong to is finally where Christ is.
I believe that home is Christ's kingdom, which exists both within us
and among us as we wend our prodigal ways through the world in search of it.

Frederick Buechner
The Longing for Home

In these busy, stressful days, as we try to cope with many demands
and busy schedules and added worry about our future,
give us, O God, a few moments of quiet and peace this morning
in which we might hear the soft, insistent voice in the wilderness:
"Fear not. Here is your God." Amen

The worst thing that could happen to anybody happened. People were removed from their homes, lined up, marched across the desert; behind them they could see the smoke rising from their beautiful city in flames, their holy temple, Jerusalem, their home. When they arrived in Babylon, they were told bluntly that the past was gone. You are no longer Jews. You have no home to which to return. Get used to it. Your home is no more.

The worst thing that could happen to anyone happened. It happens every day, as a matter of fact. For political and sometimes religious reasons, whole populations of people are removed from their homes and resettled in wretched refugee camps: Sudan, Darfur, Zimbabwe. There are Palestinian people in the West Bank who were driven from their homes and who have been living as refugees for fifty years in camps that are now cities, people

who still long for home, keep among their few valuables the key to the door of the home their family lived in for generations and from which they were forcibly removed.

It may be the worst thing that can happen. In a delightful little book, *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society*, about the German occupation of the Channel Island of Guernsey during the Second World War, the author describes the day the children were sent away:

> It happened at school where Eli and the other children were waiting for the evacuation ships to come. His parents were not there because families were not allowed (to spare the children the trauma of separation) but Isola saw it . . .
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> The room was full of children, and Elizabeth was buttoning up Eli's coat, when he told her he was scared about getting on the boat—going away from his mother and home. If their ship was bombed, he asked, who would he say good-bye to? Isola said Elizabeth took her time, like she was studying his question. Then she pulled up her sweater and took a pin from her blouse. It was her father's medal from the first war and she always wore it.
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> She held it in her hand and explained to him that it was a magic badge, and nothing bad could happen to him while he wore it. Then she had Eli spit on it twice to call up the charm. Isola saw Eli's face and told his mother that it had that beautiful light children have before the Age of Reason gets at them.
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> Of all the things that happened during the war, this one—making your children go away to keep them safe—was the most terrible. I don't know how they endured it. (Mary Ann Shaffer and Anne Barrows, p. 229)

It was the worst thing that could happen, and it is a defining moment for our religion when God's people, Israel, are defeated, torn from their homes, their city, their land, and sent into exile. It is a political and social catastrophe. And it is a theological crisis. How could this happen to us? We're God's chosen people. Has God forgotten us? Where is God, our protector and defender? Does this mean it's all over with God and us? Was it all an illusion?

The exile, some five centuries before the birth of Jesus, is a defining moment, not only because of the human tragedy, but also because it seemed to call into question the whole notion of God—God's power, God's strength, God's very existence. The biblical literature of the period is full of pathos.

Psalm 137 begins with poignant homesickness, “By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and wept,” and moves to doubt, “How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” and then to white-hot anger, “O daughter of Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us. Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against a rock!”—a sentence so angry and ghastly that we wish it weren’t there and almost never read it out loud.

One by one the prophets try to explain, blame the people for forgetting the law, neglecting their religious duties, trampling on the poor. This tragedy is punishment for your sins, they say.

And then, rising above the weeping and wailing, the lament and grief, the anger and revenge, rising above the prophetic attempts to explain it, a lone, clear voice, like the tenor whose voice rose above us and filled the sanctuary this morning:

> “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.”

It’s a poet, back in Jerusalem living among the ruins. He writes a letter to the exiled community, changes the subject from guilt and blame, offers a different opinion: punishment for your sins doesn’t make sense; it’s way out of proportion; you’ve suffered double.

It’s an argument that emerges every time tragedy strikes: the victims must have done something wrong. Hurricane Katrina: God’s wrath on New Orleans for holding a gay pride parade, a confident televangelist announced. 9/11: God punishing America for feminism and Roe v. Wade.

“Wait a minute!” the poet says. “You’ve got it all wrong. God is not a bloody avenger as your popular preachers try to insist. God doesn’t come to pay back, take a few to heaven, and leave all the rest behind to suffer and die in the final battle, as the popular and best-selling apocalypticists insist. God doesn’t come as an angry dictator evening scores with all the sinners, regardless of how many hundreds of millions of *Left Behind* books Americans buy.

“Stop it. Fear not. Here is your God. He will feed his flock like a shepherd, gather the lambs in his arms, carry them in his bosom.” How’s that for a new idea, a new theology?

“And, you’re going home, right through the desert, the same way you got here. God will lead you home, but remember, not like a mighty general, leading divisions of well-armed, vengeful troops, but like a shepherd, gathering scattered lambs, leading, carrying them home.”

Psalm 126, which we read together this morning, was written at that time: "Those who go out weeping . . . shall come home with shouts of joy"; "our mouths will be filled with laughter."

The idea of home and homecoming is powerful and deep in the heart of every one of us. Is there a better picture anywhere than one that is in the newspaper every several days, of a family waiting behind security at O'Hare, and a father or mother, still in fatigues, returning from Iraq, approaching down the concourse, and the moment of reunion with tears and kisses and embraces, children running and leaping into their father's or mother's arms, spouses, parents, overwhelmed with gratitude and joy?

Homecoming music touches deeply.

"When Johnny Comes Marching Home"
"Sweet Home Chicago"
"I'll Be Home for Christmas, If Only in My Dreams"
"There's No Place like Home for the Holidays"
"Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire"
"Swing Low, Sweet Chariot, Coming for to Carry Me Home"

And the oldest homecoming music of all:

"Comfort, comfort my people.
Prepare the way. Every valley shall be lifted up and hill made low."

You're going home.

Garrison Keillor's genius is knowing how important the idea of home is. His weekly *Prairie Home Companion* on NPR is a depiction of an older, simpler life, when people were entertained by listening to the radio and when home was the stable, permanent, center of the universe, the small hometown, the modest house that was home. In the introduction to his book *Leaving Home*, Keillor says it came to him when he himself was in a kind of exile living in Copenhagen. And one of the pieces I read every year at Christmas from *Leaving Home* is called "Exiles."

> Corrine Ingquist came home for Christmas on Sunday—barreling north in her red VW. In the back seat were two tins of tea for gifts and 132 critical essays by her seventeen-year-old students on Robert Frost's poem "The Road Not Taken."

She's actually dreading it.

> She pulled up the driveway—walked to the front door and thought "This too shall pass."

> . . .
>
> Dozens of exiles returned for Christmas. At Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility, Father Emil . . . was inspired by the sight of all the lapsed Catholics parading into church with their unbaptized children. . . . They came for Christmas, to hear the music and see the candles and smell the incense and feel hopeful. . . .
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> Corrine put off grading those papers and got busy baking cookies and little currant buns. She hadn't had them since she was little . . . and now she was baking them herself. Amazing: a delicious smell from childhood that brings back every sweet old aunt and grandma as if they're there beside you, and you do it with just a little saffron.

"Christmas exerts powerful forces," Keillor says. "We turn a corner in a wretched shopping mall and some bars of a tune switch on in our heads and gates open and tons of water thunder through Hoover Dam, the big turbines spin, electricity flows and we get in our car and [go home]" (pp. 181–183).

The idea of home and homecoming is deep in our hearts. Most of us, if we thought about it for a moment or two, could call up memories of the house, the home, in which we were children, the furniture in each room, the carpet on the floor, radio, refrigerator, kitchen, the smells. We have in us a deep sense of home.

Marilynne Robinson, author of the best-selling novel *Gilead*, has written another beautiful book, another best seller, entitled simply *Home*. It's about an aging Presbyterian minister, near the end of his life, living in the same house in which he and his wife raised a family. He's a widower and he's declining and now two adult children come home to care for him: Glory, youngest daughter, dutiful, loyal, school teacher, and Jack, the family renegade, always in trouble of one kind or another, sometimes in jail, absent from the family for long periods of time, didn't even come home for his mother's funeral. Now he's home, and it's both wonderful and painfully awkward and very complex.

After a particularly difficult interchange with his father, who can't quite get used to the fact that Jack is home, Glory asks Jack why he has come home now. "I just wanted to come home," he answers. "Even if I couldn't stay, I wanted to see the place. I wanted to see my father. . . . I was scared to come home. It was as much as I could do just to get on the bus."

As the old man continues to decline and Jack indeed gets ready to leave again, Glory looks around the house she will inherit when their father dies. "It looks like The Old Curiosity Shop—the table and side board with their

leonine legs and belligerently clawed feet . . . the wall sconces that were lotus blossoms with light bulbs where their stamens ought to be."

Brother and sister have a poignant conversation. She tells him she won't change anything. He tells her to sell the place. She tells him she couldn't do that.

"If you ever need to come home, I'll be there," she tells him.

And Jack, quoting an old hymn he sang as a child, "Yes. Ye who are weary, come home." Perhaps you sang it too as I did long ago: "Softly and tenderly, Jesus is calling, calling to you and to me. Come home, come home." There is something about this faith of ours that is about coming home, coming to our true home—God's love in Jesus Christ.

The infant was born miles from home. When he grew to adulthood he remembered those words from his people's scripture about the shepherd feeding his flock, gathering the lambs, leading them home. It is what he did, what Jesus did. It was the vocation to which he gave his life.

As we prepare to celebrate his birth, we do so best by following: by gathering the lambs, feeding, carrying, holding, leading home. It's what we do as an institution, a church, when 400 youngsters come here every week for Tutoring—gather lambs. It's what we do when the little ones arrive every morning in their strollers or trudging down the corridor with their little backpacks for Day School and day care. Gather the lambs. It's what we do when homeless men and women come here for food, warm clothing, a caring presence, an experience of grace in the middle of a busy city, a reminder of a home that once was and, more than that, a home to which we, all of us, finally belong.

It is a different Christmas this year. In addition to global danger; new incidents of terrorism; depressing continuation of political corruption and deception in Wall Street, banks, investment houses, and now at the highest levels of government in our own state—in addition to all that there is the financial crisis, the loss of jobs and savings and security. Good friend Cynthia Jarvis reminded me last week in a commentary on our text that all of a sudden the stanza in the carol,

> And ye, beneath life's crushing load,
> Whose forms are bending low,
> Who toil along the climbing way
> With painful steps and slow

sounds relevant and personal. We need, perhaps as never before, a good and hopeful and comforting word (see *Feasting on the Word*, p. 28).

At Christmas, we all go home, in one way or another, to that home where we once were at home. We go home by repeating the traditions, using the old seasonal decorations, the old favorite recipes for cookies and stuffing, gravy. “Don’t change a thing. Don’t mess with Christmas,” one of my adult children says. But in a deeper sense, we return to that home where we are accepted as we are, where we are always welcome, that home where we are forever safe regardless of what else is happening to us, that home that resembles, for all the world, the stable in Bethlehem.

In the days ahead, as we go once again to Bethlehem, we are in the truest sense coming home:

> home to the shepherd who loves us and from whose love nothing will ever separate us
>
> home to the God who came to those exiles centuries ago with comfort and hope
>
> home to the God who came in the birth of a child and in the life and love and death and resurrection of the one who was and is God’s truest revelation, God’s greatest gift, Jesus Christ, our home

Amen.